

National Elk Refuge News – May 2006

Farming Operations Underway



The National Elk Refuge began its seasonal farming program last month, initiating a summer operation that supports the Refuge's mission to provide, preserve, restore and manage winter habitat for elk, birds and other big game animals. Producing standing elk forage is key to managing habitat for the Jackson Elk Herd.

One area prominent to local residents and Refuge visitors is a 65-acre field on the south end of the Refuge, adjacent to the Refuge Road. The area was recently disked, harrowed, packed, then planted with a perennial grass mix of meadow brome and orchard grass along with a cover crop of oats. The oats, a one-year crop, will provide wildlife benefits this season as well as prevent erosion while the grasses are establishing. The

field is irrigated by a wheel line sprinkler with water from Cache Creek.

Drought conditions and grasshopper infestation have affected crop productivity over the past few years. However, fields recently planted with Russian wild

rye are becoming well established adjacent to the Flat Creek Road. Russian wild rye is well adapted to the Intermountain Region. The plants are leafy and nutritious, and, once established, are deep rooted and drought resistant.



A crop of Russian wild rye planted in Fall 2004 begins to fill in. Inset: Russian wild rye seedlings planted last fall break ground this year:

Several thousand acres of fields were harrowed this spring to break up clumps of dead grass and accumulations of manure from large numbers of wintering elk and bison. This allows the soil to aerate and encourages new growth.



Harrowing is a process that helps break up manure that accumulates each winter.



Harrowed rows show up in the morning sun.